



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Home Schooling and the Future of Public Education

Author(s): Paul T. Hill

Source: *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 75, No. 1/2, The Home Education Movement in Context, Practice, and Theory (2000), pp. 20-31

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1493087>

Accessed: 28-03-2020 16:27 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Peabody Journal of Education*

Home Schooling and the Future of Public Education

Paul T. Hill

Home schooling, not a present threat to public education, is nonetheless one of the forces that will change it. If the high estimates of the number of children in home schools—1.2 million or higher—is correct, then the home schooling universe is larger than the New York City public school system and roughly the size of the Los Angeles and Chicago public school systems combined. Even if the real number of home schoolers is more like 500,000, fewer than the lowest current estimate, there are more children home schooling than in charter schools and public voucher programs combined.¹

Home schooling is not a new phenomenon, but a very old one. In Colonial days, families, including wealthy ones, educated their children at home, combining the efforts of parents, tutors, and older children. The rural one-room schoolhouse was created by families that banded together to hire a teacher who could substitute for parents but would still use the same mixture of direct instruction, tutoring, and mentoring by older students.

PAUL T. HILL is Research Professor in the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Paul T. Hill, Graduate School of Public Affairs, 327 Parrington Hall, Box 353060, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195. E-mail: bicycle@u.washington.edu

¹The best estimates of the numbers of home schools are provided by Lines (1998) and Bruno and Curry (1997).

There is nothing un-American about home schooling. Home schooling families, however, are breaking a pattern established since Colonial times of education's becoming more and more institutionalized, formal, and removed from the family. How important is the contemporary home schooling movement, and what does it portend for American public education? No one can say for sure. It is difficult even to estimate the numbers of children being schooled at home, and evidence about student learning and other outcomes is incomplete.

It is possible, however, to draw three conclusions about where home schooling is likely to go and how it will affect the broad public education enterprise—which, for the purpose of this article, includes charter schools and publicly funded voucher programs as well as conventional district-run public schools.²

- First, home schooling is part of a broad movement in which private groups and individuals are learning how to provide services that once were left to public bureaucracies.
- Second, as home schooling families learn to rely on one another, many are likely to create new institutions that look something like schools.
- Third, although many home schooling families are willing to accept help from public school systems, the families and the schools they create are far more likely to join the charter and voucher movements than to assimilate back into the conventional public school system.

The body of this article spells out the evidence for these conclusions, and the final section considers the implications of the home school movement for the future of public education.

Developing New Teachers

Parents who decide to school their children at home commit time and energy to an activity that once was left to specialized professionals. Even in

²Facts about home schooling can be hard to come by. Home schoolers do not like big organizations, often refuse government-paid assistance, and otherwise avoid doing things that make it easy for bureaucracies to count them. Many families even shun private organizations. Although home schooling associations are growing rapidly, group leaders think that the vast majority of home schoolers are not members. To date, no government or foundation has paid for a careful assessment of all home schoolers' learning or of older children's experiences in jobs and higher education. Thus, a researcher is left with interviews with home school association leaders and with school district officials who assist home schoolers and with facts that can be gleaned from the many home school Web sites. Those are the main sources of this article.

the states with the most permissive home schooling laws, parents must learn what is normally taught to children of a given age, find materials and projects that teach specific skills, and learn how to use their own time and that of their children productively. The vast majority of home school parents who hope their children will attend colleges and universities also must learn how to assess their children's progress against higher education admission standards.

Even a casual perusal of home schooling literature can reveal the scale and intensity of home schooling parents' search for ideas, materials, and relevant standards of performance. In only 1 month, home schooling Web sites posted new ideas and materials for teaching mathematics, history, social studies, classics, literature, art, drama, and creative and expository writing. Parents can find advice about what kind of mathematics program is likely to work for their own children and can enter chat rooms with other parents struggling with the same issues.

Without making a quality judgment about these resources, it is clear that many serious people are putting in a great deal of effort. The materials available are not amateur: They come from universities, research institutes, mutual assistance networks, school districts, and state education departments. People who contribute to home schooling Web sites and association meetings also are conducting serious research and development. Home schooling is a very large teacher training program, and many tens of thousands of people are learning how to teach, assess results, and continuously improve instruction. It also must be one of the biggest parent training programs in the country.

Home schooling is not the only area in which large numbers of people are committed to learning how to serve others effectively. Nonprofit and faith-based organizations, recently the main providers of welfare and job training services, are working hard to learn how to provide effective services, keep clients, maintain private and public funding, build stable organizations, and select and train staff. Although most such organizations are led by professional managers with experience in public administration, many organizations rely heavily on people who have never before had formal training in their jobs. Chambers of commerce and associations of retired executives are helping these organizations get their feet on the ground. A conservative Christian group, Faithworks, provides volunteer leadership and training for nonprofit groups working on poverty, education, public health, job training, prisoners' transition to freedom, and so forth.

Like charter schooling, home schooling depends on the creation of new human capital. People have to learn, in new contexts and under new rules, how to teach and motivate students, take advantage of complementary adult skills, find resources, and make effective use of scarce time and money.

Critics charge that much of this effort is wasted and that, at best, all the new human capital developed at such cost can only duplicate what already exists in conventional public and private schools. Unlikely. Although the new people undoubtedly will reinvent some wheels, and some may go down blind alleys, these initiatives bring new blood and new ideas into human service areas that previously were dominated by civil service cartels and, thus, were rule-bound and risk-averse.

Likely to Evolve Toward Something Like Schools

Home schoolers are not all recluses living in remote log cabins. Growing numbers of home schooling families live in or near cities, are well educated, and hold down normal jobs. They are not all afraid of the modern world; many are inveterate users of the Internet, and large numbers of West Coast home school parents work in the computer and software industries.

Though large numbers of home schoolers are Christian fundamentalists and Mormons, many are members of mainstream religions. There are active home schooling organizations for Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews. In Washington, Oregon, and California, many of the new urban home schoolers are unchurched.

Home schoolers' fierce independence does not lead to isolationism. Increasingly, parents are bartering services—the mother who was a math major tutors children from several families in return for music or history lessons. Families come together to create basketball or soccer teams, hold social events, or put on plays and recitals. Growing numbers of home schoolers value the expertise of professional educators and are readily accepting help, advice, and testing assistance offered by school districts.

State home school association leaders say that some families have built their whole lives around teaching their children and are unlikely to change. But few home schooling parents want to isolate their children from other people. Many are happy to accept help, and they seize opportunities to have their children tutored by experts or tested in ways that demonstrably reflect progress toward meeting college admission standards.

In such a situation, it is highly likely that parents will come to collaborate, specialize, and exploit comparative advantages. It is too soon to say whether many such collaborations will ever become elaborate enough to include (a) cash payments for services or (b) the hiring of coordinators to schedule and integrate services and exercise quality control. However, some home schooling collaboratives already have advanced to the point that groups of parents find themselves running organizations that—to the naked eye—look like schools. In Colorado, Arizona, and Michigan, several

such groups have won charters and are operating as new public schools. Some home schooling groups also have created management firms offering to create new schools that coordinate parent efforts and incorporate many of the values and processes of home schooling.

The advantages are obvious: Parents can limit their time commitments and get for their children the benefits of others' expertise. They also can get public funds to pay for materials, facilities, management time, Internet hookups, and testing that they otherwise would have to spend their own time and money to arrange. Those who have mastered a subject or learned a great deal about instructional methods can even decide to become paid teachers.

However, home schooling parents would be skittish and demanding clients. Many have learned exactly what they want for their children and are unlikely to stick with an arrangement that does not deliver. But all the preconditions exist for the emergence of new schools based on what home schooling families have learned. Charter school heads report that former home schoolers, who know exactly how much their children can accomplish, are extremely demanding about the standards and pace of instruction.

"Reschooling" of home schoolers might have happened much more quickly if conservative Christian church leaders had been inclined to build new institutions. However, compared to "mainstream" Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Jewish leaders, conservative Christians have devoted relatively more energy to political movements and relatively less to institution-building. Discouraged about the results of political action, many Christian leaders are now advocating intensified investment in their own communities. Coupled with major social investments led by new organizations like Social Venture Partners and Faithworks, lay and religious leaders can, and probably will, greatly accelerate the reschooling of experienced parent-teachers and their children.

Not Likely to Meld Back Into Conventional Public Education

Although growing numbers of home schoolers are receiving valuable assistance from local public school systems, mass returns to conventional public schools are unlikely. Most home schooling parents fled something they did not like about the public education system—variously perceived as lax discipline, bad manners, low standards, unsafe conditions, and hostility to religious practice. Although some also may have fled racial integration, the majority of home schoolers live in neighborhoods where virtually all public school students are White.

In general, their Web sites make it clear that home schoolers dread bureaucracy, unions, and liberals. Parents complain about teachers who would not adjust to individual children's needs and about principals who insisted that district rules prevent using better methods, changing children's placements, accelerating instruction, or replacing bad teachers. Web sites also complain about liberal social agendas, particularly those associated with homosexuality and perceived attacks on the family. (Public schools' teaching of evolution, a persistent complaint of the religious right, gets far less attention on home school home pages than perceived advocacy of alternative life styles, as in the book *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Newman, 1989).

Although home school Web sites are full of ideas about learning projects and what conventional educators would call "authentic" performance measures, parents are openly suspicious about forms of student-directed "progressive" education used in public schools. They strongly favor reading, writing, and debating. Web sites are full of resources for teaching classic liberal arts subjects (including rhetoric) and suggestions for study of primary sources.

Complaints about state standards and performance-based education are far less prominent in home schooling materials than in religious right political agendas. Educated home schoolers are concerned about preparing their children for the real world, and they are open to state standards and testing programs that guide action and give measures of progress. Home schoolers are, however, suspicious of federally imposed rules on education of the handicapped. Their Web sites include guidance for parents who have decided to home school children with disabilities rather than keep them in public school special education programs, which they consider stigmatizing and of low quality.

These concerns, and the fact that many families began home schooling after what they perceived as "takeovers" of their local public school systems by "progressive" academics and left-of-center parents, make it unlikely that large numbers of home schooling parents can return readily to public schools. Some home schoolers will get by with the help available from public school systems, and others will seek to create charter schools. Some—the numbers depending on costs and the availability of private subsidies—also will be attracted to specially constructed private schools such as those now being created by the conservative Christian Heritage Schools.

Given American families' reliance on dual incomes, it is unlikely that home schooling will continue to grow indefinitely. But it almost certainly will continue to attract families that cannot find comfortable places in conventional public schools, and it will continue to be a channel through which parents become attached to private and charter alternatives.

What's the Harm?

What could be wrong with a movement that leads tens of thousands of people to spend vast amounts of time and money learning to teach, working closely with children, developing new instructional materials, and subjecting them to real-world tests? Critics charge that three things could be wrong: Home schooling could harm students academically; it could harm society by producing students who are ill-prepared to function as democratic citizens and participants in a modern economy; and it could make it more difficult for other parents to educate their children by harming public education. However, the best available evidence suggests that home schooling does not threaten children, society, or public education in any of these ways.

Student Learning

The same factors that make it hard to count home schoolers also make the phenomenon difficult to study. Home schoolers do not all show up at one place to be counted, and many see no reason to identify themselves in ways that might later lead to requests for information or demands on their time. Thus, at this point, there is no study on the experiences and outcomes for a truly representative sample of home school students.

The best available evidence, which is strongly positive about home school student learning, is based on a large sample of children whose parents use the Bob Jones University Testing Service for home schoolers. Rudner's (1999) analysis, based on test scores of more than 20,000 students, is highly positive:

Almost 25% of home school students are enrolled one or more grades above their age-level peers in public and private schools.

Home school student achievement test scores are exceptionally high. The median scores for every subtest at every grade (typically in the 70th to 80th percentile) are well above those of public and Catholic/Private school students.

On average, home school students in grades 1 to 4 perform one grade level above their age-level public/private school peers on achievement tests.

The achievement test score gap between home school students and public/private school students starts to widen in grade 5.

Students who have been home schooled their entire academic life have higher scholastic achievement test scores than students who have also attended other educational programs.

There are no meaningful differences in achievement by gender, whether the student is enrolled in a full-service curriculum, or whether a parent holds a state issued teaching certificate. (Rudner, 1999)³

However, these results are drawn from a self-selected group of home schoolers—less than 5% of the lowest estimated total—who sought a university's help in assessing student progress. Although there is no known profile of home schoolers against which to compare the sample, it is almost certainly a better-educated, higher-income, and better-supported (e.g., by church membership) group than home schoolers as a whole (see Welner & Welner, 1999). The potential importance of these differences is clear from another finding summarized in the article: "There are significant achievement differences among home school students when classified by amount of money spent on education, family income, parent education, and television viewing."

Thus, it is still impossible to say whether, on the whole and on average, home schooling students are doing much better than their public and private school counterparts than the results of the Rudner study would imply. However, it is also totally unwarranted to argue on the assumption that home schoolers are doing badly. Absent a rigorous (and given the difficulties of creating an adequate sampling frame, extremely expensive) study, the best guess must be that home schoolers are doing extremely well. The lurid image of the home school parent as a mad individualist who abuses his children by shielding them from knowledge is, in light of the best data, unwarranted.

In light of the best available facts, people who are worried about home school student learning have the burden of proof. They should be the ones urging the federal government to spend the millions it would cost to study participation and outcomes. Such a study would be based on a truly representative sample of home schoolers. It also would compare home schooling outcomes to the whole range of outcomes of public schools, asking not only whether home schoolers do as well on average but also whether extremely low performance is as prevalent among home schoolers as it is among public school students.

Preparation for Adult Life

Nobody knows whether home schooling produces any different mixture of geniuses, socially adept individuals, academic failures, or misfits than do conventional public schools. For that matter, nobody has a good

³For an excellent commentary on the Rudner article, see Welner and Welner (1999).

grasp on what the distribution of those outcomes is—or ought to be—in the population as a whole.

Some educators worry about the agendas of conservative religious leaders and parents, assuming they want children to become intolerant, insular, hypercompetitive, or convinced of religious or racial superiority. There is little basis for these fears, other than the long-standing tensions between religious groups (both conservative and mainstream) and the academic left. In the 1950s, some educators worried that Catholic schools were building an insular subpopulation tied to an authoritarian culture and intellectually unprepared for modern life. Harvard President James Conant called Catholic schools “divisive.” Stories about children learning arithmetic by adding and subtracting rosary beads fed this fear. Today, however, it is hard to argue that Catholic school students, among the most socially and politically active Americans and perhaps the most economically mobile, were not being at least as well prepared for life in a modern democracy as were public school students.

Concerns about the educational motives and practices of Conservative Christians echo earlier worries about Catholic schooling. Berliner (1997), for example, worries about Christian schools’ consequences for pluralism and cites examples of (presumably unacceptable) rote learning practices and underuse of modern teaching methods in Christian schools. As in the earlier case of Catholic schools, education professors’ tastes in pedagogy do not necessarily predict results.

Others avoid the trap of assessing schools in terms of current pedagogical orthodoxies but worry that home schooling (along with private schooling, charters, and vouchers) pulls children away from the socially centripetal experience of the common school, in which people of all races and backgrounds are educated together to common standards. This concern, too, has little empirical basis. Home schoolers certainly do not experience “common schools,” but neither, apparently, does anyone else. Whether they attend private or public schools, the vast majority of students are likely to attend classes and associate with others very like themselves. Even in public schools that serve all social classes and races, students are resegregated by race, social class, and academic performance.⁴

Moreover, contemporary public schools do not meet the aspirations of those who expect them to be incubators of young democrats. As Smith and Sikkink (1999) found, graduates of private (including conservative Chris-

⁴Small studies by Jay Green are about the only evidence we have on this topic, and they showed that students in private and religious schools are *more* likely to associate with children from diverse racial and income backgrounds than are children in demographically similar public schools (see, e.g., Greene & Mellow, 1998).

tian) schools are more likely than demographically similar public school graduates to express tolerant attitudes, volunteer time and money for social causes, and participate in civic debates. My own studies of high schoolers' discourse about issues of tolerance, reciprocity, and social responsibility suggest that students in large, diverse public high schools have fewer opportunities for discussion and are kept farther away from potentially emotional topics than are students in private schools.

None of this proves that home schooling meets every aspiration Americans have for their children. But it does place the worries about home schooling in perspective, and it suggests the basis on which home schooling should be evaluated: It needs to be compared to the real performance of conventional public schools, not to some idealized aspiration.

Harm to Public Education

Home schooling limits public school enrollments and therefore reduces the amounts of money state governments provide to local school districts. It also reduces the numbers of parents who expect to enhance their own children's education by voting for taxes and bond issues. On the other hand, home schooling reduces the burdens on public school systems and, in areas with growing populations, decreases pressure for new buildings and staffs. Unlike charters and public vouchers, home schooling does not force an overt transfer of public funds from an incumbent bureaucracy to a new rival organization.

Like charters and vouchers, home schooling also is criticized for weakening the common civic enterprise represented by the public school system. To some, deliberation about education is a necessary means of making one society out of many groups. To them, public policy making through elections, legislative action, ballot initiatives, and neighborhood decision making is what makes us a society. They think that people who demand freedom from regulations, educate children themselves, or pay for private schools weaken critical public forums.

There is a contrary view, that intellectual and values diversity are so important to a democratic society that questions about education never should be settled authoritatively (see, e.g., Randall, 1994, particularly chap. 5). People who hold that view point to legislatures' susceptibility to being captured by interest groups and their inability to settle deeply controversial issues. They also question whether new mechanisms like state standards-setting processes are any less susceptible to interest group logrolling. They have reason to think that standard-setting processes have degenerated into logrolling sessions among advocates for different sub-

jects and that states have pretended false clarity about what skills young people must have in our boisterous, competitive, fast-moving, technology-driven, and unpredictable society. There are, moreover, democratic theorists who question whether a parent should defer to a majority.

Again, in a situation in which so little is understood, the potential harms of home schooling seem far smaller than the harms of trying to prevent or thwart it. Every issue raised here is amenable to evidence, but abstract arguments and fears do not stand up against home school parents' First Amendment rights and their evident willingness to back up conviction with money, time, and effort.

Conclusion

The issues raised here are far from resolved. Scholarly and political discussions about home schooling are burdened by an unrecognized ambiguity in our use of the term "public education," which in some instances refers to a commitment to use any means necessary to ensure that every child learns enough to participate fully as a citizen, earner, and parent, and in other instances refers to a specific set of political bargains, rules, programs, job rights, and bureaucratic oversight mechanisms. The difference between these two definitions of public education is evident everywhere, but most painfully in the big cities. There, aspirations for student learning, racial injustice, and introduction of disadvantaged students into the mainstream of society are high. Political and educational leaders talk endlessly about the importance of high standards. But students fall further behind the longer they are in school, and more than half of them drop out before gaining a regular high school diploma.

Our dialogue about home schooling, charters, and public vouchers is frozen by confusion of means and ends. The people who run and staff conventional public schools are convinced that the current arrangements are public education. The question, put into play by home schooling and related reforms, is, Is that definition too narrow? Should home schooling, charters, and vouchers be considered parts of a broad repertoire of methods that we as a society use to educate our children? On what grounds can those questions be resolved?

References

- Berliner, D. C. (1997). Educational psychology meets the Christian right: Differing view of children, schooling, teaching, and learning. *Teachers College Record*, 98, 381–411.

- Bruno, R., & Curry, A. (1997). *Current population reports. Population characteristics: School enrollment—Social and economic characteristics of students: October 1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration.
- Greene, J. P., & Mellow, N. (1998). *Integration where it counts: A study of racial integration in private school lunchrooms*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin, Department of Political Science.
- Lines, P. M. (1998). *Home schoolers: Estimating numbers and growth*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment.
- Newman, L. (1989). *Heather has two mommies*. Boston: Alyson Wonderland.
- Randall, V. (1994). *Private schools and public power: A case for pluralism*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rudner, L. M. (1999). The scholastic achievement and demographic characteristics of home school students in 1998. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 7(8) [Online]. Retrieved March 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n8/>
- Smith, C., & Sikkink, D. (1999, April). Is private school privatizing? *First Things*, 92, 16–20.
- Welner, K. M., & Welner, K. G. (1999). Contextualizing homeschooling data: A response to Rudner. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 7(13) [Online]. Retrieved March 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n13.html>